

**Wolong,
Sichuan, China**



Snow Partridge

July 23-25, 2004

Björn Anderson

General

This weekend trip was focused on finding primarily Chinese Monal as well as Snow Partridge and Slaty Bunting. As I managed to find all three species, it must be regarded as a very successful trip. Other target birds I had in mind were Plain-backed Thrush as well as seeing Wood Snipe and Verreaux's Monal-Partridge or finding a male Golden Pheasant, none of which succeeded.

This was the third time I visited Wolong and again I am impressed by the quality birding that is on offer. When it comes to gamebirds, it must be one of the better sites in the world and I saw Chinese Monal, White Eared-Pheasant, Koklass Pheasant, Golden Pheasant and Snow Partridge.

In the last minute, I was also able to find one of my jinx birds, Slaty Bunting, which had so far eluded me at many sites in China.

Itinerary

23/7

After a quick bite in Chengdu together with the driver, I left town at around 17.00. Arrived Wolong (actually the village is named Sawan) at 20.30 and found that the complete village had changed totally during the 8 months since I visited last time. The old filthy hotel had been replaced by a luxurious hotel with restaurant and a park where there had been some old buildings. Absolutely amazing how things could change so quickly! I actually had to take a quick walk in order to make sure I was in the right village, so big was the difference.

24/7

Graham Talbot and Chris Campion from HK had arrived during the night and together we boarded the car at 4.00 and headed for Balanshan. At 5.30 we arrived at the well-known site for Wood Snipe just beyond km 92. The clouds covered the area and only one Wood Snipe called a couple of times, so it was probably too late in the season. (Last year I heard them roding actively in early July). Soon after dawn we walked up the slopes at km 92 in order to look for the target bird: Chinese Monal. The trail we first found soon vanished and we found ourselves hacking our way through the bushes. After the rain during the night, we all got completely soaked from the wet vegetation. After some time we found the way through the bushes and reached the alpine meadows. At first they were covered in pretty high vegetation, but at higher altitudes it was easier to walk. White Eared-Pheasants were heard below us and a Koklass Pheasant was showing off before the clouds moved in again. Soon after, a party of White Eared-Pheasants were found just near us and we could follow them as they contoured the hillside. It was not long before Graham and Chris sighted some Chinese Monals and we could then admire three stunning males in full sunshine as they walked across the hill-side. Mission completed! We slowly worked our way back to the road without adding too many new birds. As the weather was exceptionally good, we decided to head straight for Balanshan Pass. This pass is at 4525 meters, and coming basically straight from sea-level, it is a challenge to climb even higher up the slopes. Nevertheless, in order to find Snow Partridge, another of my target birds for the weekend, one has to climb up the scree slopes above the pass. Fortunately it did not take me more than half an hour to find a small group that performed brilliantly at close range. Other birds of interest were some Grandalas and Himalayan Griffons. Chris saw some Snow Pigeons, Lammergeier and a Tibetan Snowcock

Due to the headache, we returned to lower elevations at km 92 (3300 m) and walked along the road for a couple of hours, although there were few new birds around. In the late afternoon we drove back to the hotel at Sawan and tried to find our way up through the forest behind the hotel. After an initial very steep climb, we soon reached the larch forest and searched for Slaty Bunting and Golden Pheasant. The trails are nowadays very difficult to follow and this is especially true at this time of the year when they are very overgrown. Thus we ended up hacking our way through the forest, not seeing a single bird of interest. At dusk we gave up and had dinner and celebrated the gamebirds of the day.



Koklass Pheasant

25/7

Graham and Chris left early for a walk up to Wujipung, whereas I opted for another search for Slaty Bunting above the village. This time I tried a new trail that leads up through the narrow valley above the eastern part of the village. For a change, the trail was easy to follow and I climbed almost to the lonely tree where I worked the trails back and forth in search of Golden Pheasants. The weather was initially misty, but soon improved and became sunny and clear, which is in my experience an unexpected bonus at Wolong. Later in the morning I decided to the larch forest above the village and walked the single trail up and down, looking for Slaty Buntings. Having unsuccessfully looked for them at several sites in Sichuan over the last year, I became very worried when there were no signs on them. I flushed a gamebird chick, which presumably was a Golden Pheasant, but otherwise the forest was very silent.

At 11.00, I finally gave up on the Bunting and went back to the hotel to sort out my departure. As it turned out the flights during the afternoon from Chengdu to Beijing were fully booked, so I had another couple of hours to spend. Feeling a little bit refreshed, I decided to give the Bunting another go and thus climbed up the forest again. It was midday and very quiet, but a sound alerted my interest and suddenly I found a family party of Golden Pheasants feeding on small berries in a tree right above the trail less than 50 meters from the houses. Alas there was no male to be seen, but it was anyway a rewarding observation. Energized by this, I carried on up the same trail I had been working in the morning and just as I was about to turn back, I heard a typical bunting-call. A bird flew away and my impression was really that it was a Slaty Bunting, but...

Fortunately it paid off to wait, as it returned after a few minutes and turned out to be a female Slaty. Yip!! It perched only 10 meters from me calling continuously as if having a nest nearby. As a matter of fact, I suddenly flushed a juvenile and then the male showed up a close range and gave stunning views. Eventually this jinx endemic was bagged and it was in the last minute, as I had to rush back to the hotel and the drive back to Chengdu. The return journey was initially rather uneventful, but about halfway we found ourselves stuck in a stand-still line of cars and trucks. Apparently an accident ahead and it painfully reminded me of a similar experience at exactly the same spot last summer. After 1.5 hours, the line of cars were slowly starting to move and my buffer hour was eaten up by now. I called my travel agent and changed flight to one that should fit our delayed schedule. The drive was however very slow and I was starting to get really worried about missing also this flight (and knowing that the later ones were full!). Murphy's Law stroke again when the driver did not find the way to the airport and suddenly was completely lost. 15 minutes before departure time, I eventually checked in and with some apparently convincing smiles, I managed to get first class emergency service to get through quickly.

Weather

Surprisingly good to be Wolong in the summer. Just a few drops of rain and most clear from low clouds and we even had some prolonged sunshine.

Logistics

I booked the pick up/drop off through Wolong Hotel, which worked out reasonably well (although see above for the return trip). It was the same driver as I had had a couple of times before and he thus knew the game of birding.

Site descriptions

For more detailed site descriptions, see my previous reports from July and November 2003. This time I visited only three places: the area around km 92, Balanshan Pass and the slopes above Sawan village.

Km 92

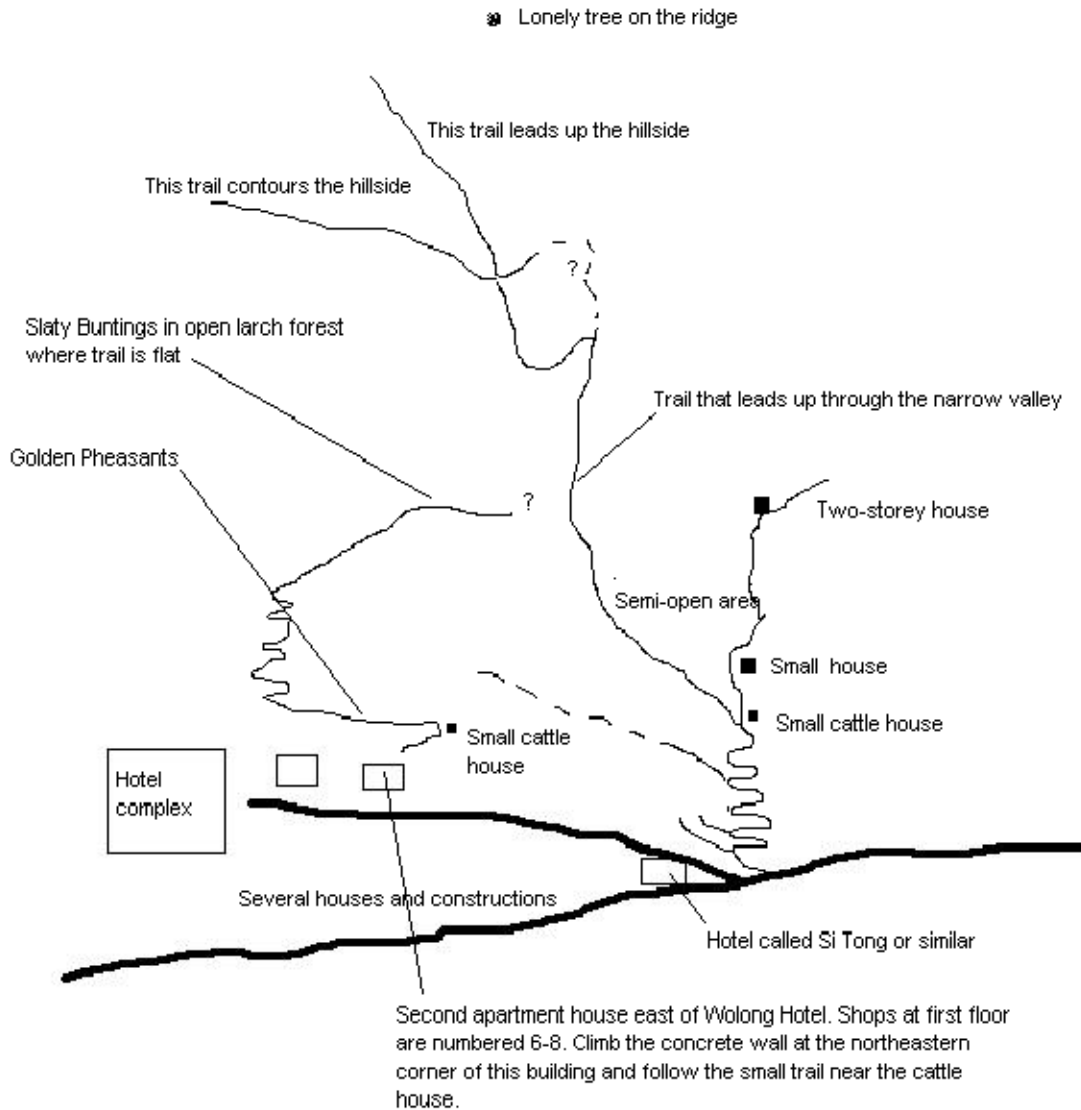
This seems to be a fairly reliable site for Monal and Eared-Pheasant. About 200 m after the km 92 marker, there is a minute trail leading up on the steep hill-side. For the first 100-200 meters, the trail could be very tricky to follow as it was very overgrown. It should however be possible to crash through the bushes and keep somewhat to the right (east) of the small stream that comes down the small valley. The important thing is to get up to the short grass slopes, which means a 200-300 m climb. The Monals were seen almost at the ridges on the areas where yaks have grazed the hillsides. They were also seen resting at the edge of the rhododendron scrub. The Eared-Pheasants and Koklass Pheasant were seen in slightly more vegetated areas.

Balanshan Pass

At 4525 meters this is real high altitude birding. We only spent a short time here, but still managed to find the much wanted Snow Partridge. They were found just beyond the pass and up to the left on the scree slopes. About 200-300 meters from the pass and up on the left side, there is a small patch of water like a small pond. The partridges were 100-200 above this place.

Slopes above Sawan

This area is famous for being one of the best places in the world for Golden Pheasant. However, it is nowadays somewhat difficult to access, as the trails are very overgrown. The new hotel complexes having been built means that large concrete walls has been constructed between the village and the forest and thus fewer people walk the trails. It is still possible to climb up behind the houses according to the map. Another way of entering the forest is to walk to the eastern part of the village and then follow a trail up through the valley towards to big lonely tree and then descend through the forest.



Birds

This list refers to my own personal observations. Graham and Chris went to Wujipung on the Sunday and of course added a number of more species. As this trip was dedicated to finding a few selected species, I did miss many common species of the area, so the list is not representative for this fantastic place on earth.

Himalayan Vulture, *Gyps himalayensis*

A few seen at or near Balanshan Pass.

Eurasian Buzzard, *Buteo buteo japonicus*

Two at Balanshan Pass and one dark phase at km 92.

Snow Partridge, *Lerwa lerwa*

A group of two pairs (one pair having pulli and one pair having juveniles) at Balangshan Pass.

Koklass Pheasant, *Pucrasia macrolopha ruficollis*

One male perched in the grass above km 92 for a while until the clouds swept in.

Chinese Monal, *Lophophorus lhyusii*

Target bird of the weekend. Three adult males seen very well as they strolled across the short-grass hillside. Finally they reached some rhododendron scrub and vanished, but later I refound an immature male and two adult males hiding under a rhododendron bush in the same area. Thus altogether at least four birds.



Chinese Monal

White Eared-Pheasant, *Crossoptilon crossoptilon crossoptilon*

Heard just above the road at km 92 and then another group of about eight adults and a few chicks at close range further up the hillside.



White Eared-Pheasants

Golden Pheasant, *Chrysolophus pictus*

One chick flushed in the larch forest above Sawan was presumably this species.

Then a group of one female and three juveniles feeding on small black berries in a tree less than 50 meters above Wolong Hotel.

Wood Snipe, *Gallinago nemoricola*

Heard calling a couple of times before dawn around km 93 (just where the powerline crosses the road, same site as I heard them in early July last year).

Lesser Cuckoo, *Cuculus poliocephalus*

One heard from the valley below km 92.

Grey Nightjar, *Caprimulgus indicus hazarae*

One flushed from the roadside east of Wolong in the evening.

Fork-tailed Swift, *Apus pacificus kanoi*

A few above Sawan village.

Asian House Martin, *Delichon dasypus cashmiriensis*

Common around km 92 and at Sawan village.

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea melanope*

Two in Sawan village and one near Balanshan Pass.

Rosy Pipit, *Anthus roseatus*

Common above the tree-line.



Rosy Pipit

Long-tailed Minivet, *Pericrocotus ethologus ethologus*

15 above Sawan village.

Rufous-breasted Accentor, *Prunella strophhiata strophhiata*

Four on the slopes above km 92.



Rufous-breasted Accentor

Blue Rock-Thrush, *Monticola solitarius pandoo*

One along the road coming back from Wolong to Chengdu.

Blue Whistling-Thrush, *Myophonus caeruleus caeruleus*

Five along the river east of Wolong.

Chestnut Thrush, *Turdus rubrocanus gouldi*
Ten around km 92.

Kessler's Thrush, *Turdus kessleri*
Abolut five on the slopes above km 92.

Aberrant Bush-Warbler, *Cettia flavolivacea intricata*
About five in secondary scrub above Sawan village.

Pale-rumped Warbler, *Phylloscopus chloronotus*
One above Sawan village.

Greenish Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochiloides trochiloides*
Common around km 92.

Large-billed Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus magnirostris*
Two above Sawan village.

Blyth's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus reguloides claudiae*
20+ above Sawan village.

Omei/Grey-crowned Warbler, *Seicercus omeiensis/tephrocephalus*
Common above Sawan village.

Bianchi's Warbler, *Seicercus valentini*
Two heard around km 92.

Slaty-blue Flycatcher, *Ficedula tricolor diversa*
One male above Sawan village.

Blue-fronted Redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis*
Fairly common around km 92.

White-capped Water-Redstart, *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*
A few around km 92.

Plumbeous Water-Redstart, *Rhyacornis fuliginosus fuliginosus*
Fairly common in Sawan village and along the river east of Wolong.

Grandala, *Grandala coelicolor*
About five at Balanshan Pass.

Giant Laughingthrush, *Garrulax maximus*
A few heard around km 92.

Elliot's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax elliotii elliotii*
Fairly common around km 92 and Sawan village.

White-collared Yuhina, *Yuhina diademata*
One above Sawan village.

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus yunnanensis*
A few in and above Sawan village.

Gould's Sunbird, *Aethopyga gouldiae dabryii*
One female above Sawan village.

Grey-backed Shrike, *Lanius tephronotus tephronotus*
A few at km 92 and Sawan village.

Eurasian Nutcracker, *Nucifraga caryocatactes macella*
Heard above Sawan village.

Red-billed Chough, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax brachypus*
Three at Balanshan Pass.

Yellow-billed Chough, *Pyrrhocorax graculus digitatus*
Two at Balanshan Pass.

Large-billed Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos tibetosinensis*
Two near km 92.

Common Rosefinch, *Carpodacus erythrinus roseatus*
Common around km 92.

White-browed Rosefinch, *Carpodacus thura femininus*
Heard at km 92.

Red Crossbill, *Loxia curvirostra himalayensis*

10+ above Sawan village.

Slaty Bunting, *Latoucheornis siemsseni*

A pair with one chick above Sawan village.